## Frequently Asked Questions about Waldorf Education

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#### ALABAMA WALDORF SCHOOL

a community dedicated to educating responsible world citizens

#### What is Waldorf Education?

Developed by Rudolf Steiner in Germany in 1919, Waldorf Education is based on a developmental approach that addresses the needs of the growing child and maturing adolescent. Waldorf teachers strive to transform education into an art that educates the whole child – not just their thinking or intellectual life, but their emotional and moral life, as well. Since 1919, the Waldorf movement has spread worldwide, with over 1,000 schools on five continents.

Waldorf teachers embrace their vocation with a sense of enthusiasm and seriousness of purpose. Their task is to educate with a deep respect and love for each child, making it their primary responsibility to answer questions such as:

- How do I establish within each child his or her own high level of academic excellence?
- How do I instill enthusiasm for learning and work?
- How do I promote a healthy self-awareness, as well as a genuine interest and concern for people from all cultures and traditions?
- How do I teach a healthy respect for the earth?
- How can I help my students find meaning in their lives?

Is Waldorf Similar to Montessori?

These two educational approaches began with a similar goal: to design a curriculum that was developmentally appropriate to the child, and to address the child's need to learn in a tactile as well as an intellectual way. The philosophies are otherwise very different. Legend has it that Steiner and Montessori met after WWI to determine how best to heal society. Both agreed that education was the right vehicle. Montessori felt her native Italians were too steeped in feeling and that there wasn't enough emphasis on thinking. Steiner felt his native Austrians were too steeped in thinking that wasn't counter-balanced with feeling. So, each created their own educational philosophy appropriate for each culture. Today, Montessori is known for its cognitive approach, while Steiner Waldorf schools are known for their whole-child approach.

#### Are Waldorf schools religious?

Waldorf schools are non-sectarian and non-denominational. They educate all children, regardless of their cultural or religious backgrounds. The pedagogical method is comprehensive, and, as part of its task, seeks to promote the recognition and understanding of different world cultures and religions. Waldorf

schools are not part of any church. They espouse no particular religious doctrine but certainly embrace the idea that there is a spiritual dimension to the human being, as well as to all life. Waldorf families come from a broad spectrum of religious traditions and interests.

#### What is the curriculum like in a Waldorf school?

In the Preschool, children learn primarily through imitation as carried out in their playing life. The goal of the Kindergarten and the Nursery is to develop in the young child a sense of wonder and reverence for all living things. Preschool teachers are worthy role models as they guide the students through social interactions meaningful work. Through play, circle activities, stories, and crafts, a developmentally-appropriate, pre-academic curriculum is created. In preserving the idea of a rich childhood, the Waldorf preschool instills a strong foundation for later problem-solving, critical thinking, and imaginative capacities essential for success in the grades.

Nursery and Kindergarten activities include:

- storytelling, puppetry, creative play
- singing, games, and finger plays
- painting, drawing, and beeswax modeling
- · baking and cooking, nature walks
- daily circle activities with poems, songs, and movements that celebrate seasonal and cultural festivals

Elementary and middle-school students learn through the guidance of a class teacher who stays with the same class ideally from first through eighth grade. The curriculum includes:

- Language Arts (reading and writing) through the teaching of folktales, world literature, myths and legends, biographies and great works of fiction
- History that is chronological and inclusive of the world's great civilizations
- Science that is taught experientially, and surveys botany, geography, astronomy, mineralogy, physical and life sciences
- Mathematics that develop competence in arithmetic, algebra, and geometry; the quality of the concepts are just as important as the fluency.
- Two foreign languages from Grade 1: Russian and Spanish
- Movement Education
- Fine Arts including music, painting, sculpture, drama, dance, eurythmy, and drawing
- Handwork such as knitting, crocheting, sewing, weaving, and woodworking

### How does Waldorf Education prepare children for the "real" world?

It is easy to fall into believing that education must make our children fit into society. Although we are certainly influenced by what the world brings us, the fact is that the world is shaped by people. However, that shaping of the world is possible in a healthy way only if the shapers themselves are in possession of their full nature as human beings.

Education in our often materialistic, Western society focuses on the intellectual aspect of the human being and has chosen largely to ignore the several other parts that are essential to our well-being. These include our life of feeling (emotions, and social sensitivity), our willpower (the ability to get things done), and our moral nature (being clear about right and wrong). If these are not developed, we can be incomplete—a fact that may only become obvious in our later years. That is why in a Waldorf school, the practical and artistic subjects play a role that is just as important as the full spectrum of traditional academic subjects as they mediate between the form that is necessary to function in society and the freedom of being an individual operating within that society.

Waldorf Education recognizes and honors the full range of human potentialities. It addresses the whole child by striving to awaken and ennoble all the latent capacities. The children learn reading, writing, and math; they study 5,000 years of history, geography, and the sciences. In addition, all children learn to sing, play a musical instrument, draw, paint, model with clay, knit, carve and work with wood, speak clearly and act in a play, think independently, and work harmoniously and respectfully with others. The development of these various capacities is interrelated. For example, boys and girls learn to knit in Grade One. Acquiring this basic and enjoyable human skill helps them develop manual dexterity but also increases the strength and number of fibers in the corpus callosum which joins the two hemispheres of the brain. After puberty, the brain of the child who has learned to knit will be transformed into an instrument of clear thinking belonging to a person who can "knit" his/her thoughts into a coherent whole.

Waldorf Education has as its ideal a person who is knowledgeable about the world and human history and culture, who has many varied practical and artistic abilities, who feels a deep reverence for the natural world, and who can act with both initiative and freedom in the face of today's intense economic and political pressures. Graduates of Waldorf schools are well-rounded people who are prepared for life.

There are many Waldorf graduates of all ages who embody these ideals and who are perhaps the best proof of the efficacy of the education. Graduates of Alabama Waldorf School (formerly The Redmont School in the Waldorf Tradition) attend the following schools: Indian Springs School, The Altamont School, Alabama School of Fine Arts, Shades Valley Theater Academy, Homewood High School, Shades Valley Visual Arts Academy, Jefferson County International Baccalaureate School, Hoover High School, Pelham High School.

#### Are Waldorf graduates successful and happy with their lives?

Waldorf students across the country have been accepted in and graduated from a broad spectrum of colleges and universities including Stanford, UC Berkeley, Harvard, Yale, and Brown. Waldorf graduates reflect a wide diversity of professions and occupations including medicine, law, science, engineering, computer technology, the arts, social science, government, and teaching at all levels.

According to a recent national study of Waldorf graduates:

- 94% attended college or university
- 47% chose humanities or arts as a major
- 42% chose sciences or math as a major
- 89% are highly satisfied in choice of occupation
- 91% are active in lifelong education
- 92% placed a high value on critical thinking
- 90% highly value tolerance of other viewpoints

## What is the benefit of teaching reading at a slower, more intense pace?

In the preschool and early grades, Waldorf teachers focus on building in the child the capacity to create and hold mental pictures. On a surface level, the process of reading text is merely the act of decoding symbols. Below the surface is where many children in traditional schools struggle. Reading comprehension, especially in the later grades, proves to be more difficult if the student has not learned how to form mental pictures. In Waldorf schools, students listen to stories told by the teacher every week. An emphasis on rich language evocative imagery encourages the child's imagination to develop. In the preschool, the child often participates in the storytelling by creating simple costumes out of play silks and acting out a role as the teacher narrates. In the grades, the students participate in re-telling Main Lesson stories through pictures drawn or painted on paper, through performing skits, and also through class discussions.

Recent evidence that shows that normal, healthy children who learn to read relatively late are not disadvantaged, but rather are able quickly to catch up with, and may overtake, children who have learned to read early. Additionally, they have been shown to be much less likely to develop the "tiredness toward reading" that many children who are taught to read at a very early age experience later. In the place of tiredness, there is lively interest in reading and learning that continues into adulthood. Some children will, out of their own initiative, want to learn to read at an early age. This interest can and should be met, as long as it comes *from the child*.

Each child has his or her own optimal time for "taking off." Without being pushed, a healthy child will generally pick up reading quite quickly and easily. Some Waldorf parents become anxious if their child is slower to learn to read than his/her public school peers. Eventually, though, their patience is rewarded

when they see their child pick up a book only to put it down once the last page has been reached!

## Why do Waldorf schools recommend the limiting of television, videos, and radio for young children?

A central aim of Waldorf Education is to stimulate the healthy development of the child's own imagination. Waldorf teachers are concerned that electronic media hampers the development of the child's imagination, feeding the child fixed images instead of allowing them to develop their own. They are also concerned about the physical effects of electronic media on the developing child as well as the content of much of the programming.

Much current research sheds light on this topic. See:

- Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don't Think by Jane Healy
- Failure To Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds For Better and Worse by Jane Healy
- Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television by Jerry Mander
- The Plug-In Drug by Marie Winn
- Evolution's End: Claiming The Potential of Our Intelligence by Joseph Chilton Pearce

# A Waldorf class teacher ideally stays with a group of children several years in a row. What if my child does not get along with the teacher?

This question often arises because of a parent's experience of public school education. In most public schools, a teacher works with a class for nine months of the year. It is difficult for teacher and child to develop the deep human relationship that is the basis for healthy learning if change is frequent. If a teacher has a class for several years, the teacher and the children come to know and understand each other in a deep way. The children, feeling secure in a long-term relationship, experience a better environment for learning. The interaction of teacher and parents along the way can also become more deep and meaningful over time, and the relationship between them can foster cooperation and healthy development for the child.

Problems between teachers and children, and between teachers and parents, can and do arise. A Waldorf class is something like a family. If a mother in a family does not get along with her son during a certain time, she does not consider resigning or replacing him with another child. Rather, she looks at the situation and sees what can be done to improve the relationship. In other words, the adult assumes responsibility and tries to address the situation. This same approach is used by the Waldorf teacher in a difficult situation. In almost every case s/he must ask herself: "How can I effect change so that the relationship becomes more positive?" With the good will and active support of the parents, the teacher can make the necessary changes and ensure the relationship is in a healthy and productive state.

## What is the tuition at Alabama Waldorf School? Is there financial assistance available?

Tuition costs and financial assistance vary from school to school and are comparable to other private schools in the same geographic location that are not subsidized through church affiliations. In the United States, Waldorf schools are independent and are supported by tuition income, fees, and charitable contributions. Each school develops its financial aid assistance policies and determines the amount of tuition assistance it can offer. There is no North American general fund at this time to assist individual children to go to a Waldorf school.

At Alabama Waldorf School, the Finance Manager can provide an application for tuition adjustment through the Tuition Adjustment Program (TAP). This program provides parents, school representatives, and even objective third-party entities an opportunity to confidentially review budgetary information from both the school and the family in order to arrive at a tuition that each party can manage.